

In Bloom by ActionGerard

Category: IT (2017), Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Hanahaki Disease, M/M

Language: English

Relationships: Will Byers/Mike Wheeler, Will Byers/Richie Tozier, Will Byers/Sadness

Status: Completed

Published: 2017-12-28

Updated: 2017-12-30

Packaged: 2022-04-03 15:08:01

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings: Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Chapters: 4

Words: 16,310

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

WARNINGS: Mild Language, Mentions of Death, Character Deaths, Diseases, and Richie Tozier.

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1. Stage One

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The first time it happened, he was having dinner with his family, with his brother retelling some odd work place tale and his mom laughing at whatever Jonathan said. It was fun, it was calming, somehow making him forget about school and friends and the *upside down* - basically just all of the things that had been stressing him out lately.

He excused himself politely, practically dashing to the bathroom to get off the itch he felt on his throat. He was aware of the fact that he had been throwing up slugs now for almost a week already, and that no one knew about it. It wasn't that he didn't want his mom or Jonathan to know - it was just that he didn't want to feel more like a burden than he already was.

He let out a cough, enough to hurt his throat and make breathing hard, expecting to see another one of those weird and disgusting slugs that still scared the life out of him. But what he saw took him by surprise instead.

It was a petal.

Red and small, and from the looks of it, it looked like it came from a rose, of all the cliché things out there.

Somehow, it made breathing even harder.

Will had heard about the tales, but never really found himself believing it. He had heard about people coughing out flowers, about how serious it could be, about how it could be treated by doctors and hospitals and *surgeries*, and about how rare the disease could be.

He had heard about how unrequited love was causing all of it.

He grasped the sink tightly, afraid he'd fall if he let go, and took the petal in his hands, carefully examining it. He let out a shaky breath - this was actually happening, this was *real*.

Real, real, real.

It couldn't be, he thought anxiously, feeling his heart up in his throat. He was so stupid, *so stupid*. How could he let this all happen? He thought he had it under control, he thought everything was fine, *he thought...*

He didn't know. He didn't know what he thinks.

All he knew was that he was too much of a fool to let everything get away *this far*.

Carefully flushing the petal in the toilet - actually waiting for it to be downed and disappear into the water, he let out a sigh and forced himself back to the dining room, greeting both his mom and brother with a small smile.

"Are you okay, honey?" His mom asked worriedly, looking at him with furrowed eyebrows.

"Great," he replied, hoping he sounded casual. "Why?"

"I don't know, you just look really pale."

"Must be the weather," he shrugged.

His mom threw a concerned, disbelieving look at his side, but didn't mention anything, which was something he was thankful for.

All the time he was trying to finish his dinner, he thought for the first time about how he would exchange throwing slugs off for flowers. He never thought he'd ever think that way. At the same time, he could pretend he wasn't thinking about why he had this at the first place - about *who*.

Mike Wheeler.

"Are you okay?"

"Of course," he smiled, looking at Mike weirdly. "Why wouldn't I be?"

There were a lot of things why he wouldn't be.

He wasn't okay, and he knew that fact well. This morning before he went to school, he had a coughing fit in his room and he was too out of it to even remember anything until he noticed all of the scattered petals in his room, which sent him to a constant state of panic.

It was all too clear now - it was actually *happening*.

He thought he could pretend for a while about what happened last night was nothing but a dream - a hallucination formed by his sick traumas and experiences in the upside down - but no. Turned out that Will Byers wasn't much of a freak just yet. He needed another reason to prove everyone just that.

"You're just acting all different," Mike replied warily.

"I'm fine, Mike," Will chuckled.

"If you're sure."

They were currently having their lunch at the cafeteria, with Lucas and Dustin arguing about the latest science fiction film they've seen, and Max and Jane minding their own businesses talking about skateboards and science and sports. Mike, on the other hand, was just looking at him with a concerned expression on his face.

"Where's Richie?" Will asked, hoping to get Mike's attention on to something else.

"He skipped school today, I think," Max said, glancing at Will. "He wasn't in my Algebra class."

"He's not in Science, too," Lucas chimed in.

Will frowned. It wasn't like Richie to skip school, despite him droning on and on about how much he hated it. Everyone knew enough to know how much Richie wanted to *'fucking arson this school, I'm telling you'*, but never missed a single class to even prove it.

"He never missed school," he stated, earning a somewhat approving looks from the party. "Do you think everything is fine?"

"He's okay, Will," Mike sighed.

"How did you know?"

"I just do," Mike reasoned out with finality in his voice. "Don't worry too much, all right? I'm sure Tozier is fine."

Will wasn't too convinced.

"Will," Mike sighed when he saw Will's expression. "Look, if it will actually make you feel better, we can come visit him after school."

"Okay," he replied simply. That wasn't a bad idea.

Yeah, maybe Richie was fine after all.

The first one to know about his disease was Richie.

It was exactly when he and Mike decided to visit Richie after class and finding out Richie was actually fine - *just lazy, he had said*. Will still didn't know why he wasn't too convinced.

"I'm good as new, Wills Bills. Fucking A," Richie grinned as he wrapped an arm around Will's shoulder, ignoring Mike who rolled his eyes. "Don't miss me too much, yes?"

"Don't torture him, Rich," Mike sighed.

"I'm not," Richie stuck his tongue out. "But thank you for the visit. I appreciate all the love."

"Shut up," Will laughed.

And then he felt it.

He could feel the itch in his throat once again, the lack of air coming in to his lungs, and the inability to speak properly. He was *terrified*, and seeing both his friends there with him made everything worse.

"Hey, Will," Mike looked at him with concern once again. "Are you all right?"

"Fine," he managed to gasp out. "Bathroom, Rich?"

"Just go straight and turn left," Richie replied hastily, looking confused and worried, but Will was panicking too much to even notice.

He ran to the bathroom and quickly locking it behind him, before letting out harsh fits of coughs, leaving scattered petals everywhere.

Oh, God, he thought.

He sat on the bathroom floor for as long as he could remember, coughing and actually seeing petals coming out from his mouth, and he felt the inability to breathe once again and though, *God, I'm dying*.

"Will?"

His breath hitched and he looked up rapidly and eyed the door fearfully, quickly pushing himself up to scamper and collect the bits and pieces of petals on the floor with shaking hands.

"Will, are you okay?" He could hear Richie's voice once again followed by frantic knocking. "Will."

"I-I'm okay," he squeaked.

He could feel his heart bursting in his chest, he couldn't see clearly, he was losing balance and falling again all over, he was coughing up *flowers, God* - of course he wasn't okay.

But his friends didn't need to know that.

"Will," Richie called out again, a little more persistent this time.

"Hang on," Will almost snapped despite his voice cracking a little, throwing all the petals in the toilet bowl. He glanced at the floor and cursed, *when the heck did it get so many?*

"Will," Richie repeated, and he sounded forceful, almost panicked. "Will, come on. I'm serious."

Will was about to reply, still picking up the fallen flowers and hastily putting them on the toilet, the trashbin, *his pockets*, until he heard the scratching of the keys, and was met eye to eye with Richie Tozier.

Will felt his body go numb.

Richie's eyes widened, closing the door shut and sitting in front of Will, asking worriedly, "*Shit, shit, shit*, Will. Fuck, since when?"

"Last night," Will whispered, his voice quickly turning into a sob.

He felt Richie wrap his arms around him tightly, swaying both of them back and forth as he fiddled with Will's hair gently. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Stop crying, William. I got you, okay?"

"Rich, I don't know what to do," Will cried out hysterically. "I could -

God, I could die."

"You won't die," Richie replied sharply.

Will didn't reply. He wasn't too sure about that - wasn't too sure about fooling himself with it anymore. He practically *gave up* on life when his poor body had been possessed only months ago, but this? This was definitely worse.

They stayed like that in silence for a while, with Richie muttering reassuring thoughts into Will's hair, while Will cried quietly, wondering why, why, *why his life had to be the worst one out there*.

Of course, it would be too ideal to think his sufferings actually ended with the Mind Flayer, that almost dying twice was actually enough bad lucks for him.

Of course.

"Who is it?" Richie asked softly, cutting Will out of his trance.

When Will couldn't put himself to respond, he only cried harder. Still, Richie seemed to understand all of it. He tightened his arms around Will, sighing deeply, and murmuring, "Of fucking course, it's him."

And yeah, Will thought bitterly. *Of fucking course, indeed.*

"You guys sure took your time in the bathroom," was the first thing Mike said when they entered Richie's bedroom, arms crossed and eyes suspicious.

Will stopped breathing for a moment, eyes widening slightly, until Richie beat him to it, grinning at Mike, "We got biz-zay, Wheela. Should've joined us when you got the chance."

Will blushed furiously.

Mike rolled his eyes.

The reason why they took longer (aside from the comforting and embracing) was because they had to clean the red petal stains lingering on the bathroom floor, and Will already felt guilty as he was, but Richie cut him off with an, "It's fine, Will."

He felt real bad for messing up someone's bathroom.

"What's that then?" Mike asked, pointing at Richie and narrowing his eyes.

"What's what?"

"*That*," he repeated, and Will looked the same time Richie looked down at his shirt, and surely, there it was.

A petal stain.

Will's heart started pounding abnormally in his chest again, and regretting throwing a glance at Mike and seeing his suspicious expression worsen.

Mike knew, he thought, already panicking internally. *God, he knew. How did he know? It's all over, oh, God, it's -*

"Lipstick."

"What?" Mike furrowed his eyebrows. Will had to stop the urge from doing the same thing himself.

"It's lipstick. It's my mom's," Richie replied simply, shrugging. "Willington here, as the genius he is, managed to knock out my mom's makeup set. Do you want to try it on, Wheela?"

"Whatever," Mike rolled his eyes again, before looking at Will, back with the concerned expression he had a while ago. "You're fine?"

"I am."

"Right," he nodded, before saying. "As much as I like hanging out here, we got to go. It's school night, after all."

"Of course," Richie replied before walking them out the door.

Mike and Will already settled themselves upon their bicycle before Will looked back at Richie, and asking, "You want to come over this Saturday?"

"Hell yes," Richie grinned. "You coming, Wheela?"

"Can't," Mike shrugged, frowning. "My mom's expecting me to babysit Holly."

"Sucks," Richie tutted, shaking his head, before grinning once again and practically shooing both Will and Mike away. "Now, off you go, you baby ducklings. Remember mommy duck loves you, and don't talk to big bad wolves."

"Dork," Will laughed.

Richie smiled softly at him.

Will pedaled next to Mike, wondering why of all people, he just had to fall in love with his best friend which caused flowers to come out of his mouth.

He sighed.

He never really liked flowers anyway.

As much as Will hated admitting it out loud, he actually liked it when Max and Jane would experiment on him with their 'girl stuff'. Both girls insisted it was because Will had the *features* for it and that his skin was good and all that, but Will knew it was only because he was the only one nice enough to actually let them do this.

It was proven when Dustin, Lucas and Mike shook their heads no before Max was even finished with her proposition.

Tonight was a nail polish day, it turned out. Will had let Jane do his right hand while Max did the other, something he instantly regretted when he decided he had to actually use *his hands*.

"I think black would look good on you," Max stated, debating between the black and nail polish on her hands. "Gives off the whole punk vibes."

"Orange is good," Jane said, busily painting Will's nails pink.

"I can't believe I'm letting you guys do this," Will sighed heavily.

"You love us," Max snickered.

Will felt the need to go to the bathroom for minutes now. He could feel a cough bubbling up his throat, but he swallowed it hardly, deciding a few more minutes would do. He could do this, he thought. He had gotten good at preventing himself from coughing up roses anyway.

"Right," he cleared his throat.

"Is everything okay?" Max asked suddenly, looking at Will.

"Yeah, just," Will cleared his throat again, and he was starting to feel that inevitable itch once again. "Just need to go to the bathroom, I think."

"You should've said something earlier," Max rolled her eyes playfully. "Go, it's just down there near the stairs."

Will practically bolted out the door.

After a minute of harsh and painful coughing fits, leaving flowers all over, Will sighed and looked down at his hands, seeing the ruined nail polish plastered on his nails.

Jane and Max would definitely be disappointed. He just had to tell them to repeat their works, he guessed.

He let himself out of the bathroom for once, but not before making sure he left everything the way it was supposed to be.

"You ruined it," Jane said with a pout when Will came back. "You don't like it?"

"I do like it," Will replied almost instantly, before letting out a deep sigh. "I'm sorry, Jane. You can do it again. I won't ruin it this time, I promise."

"You promise?"

Will nodded. "I promise."

Max started narrating about her experience with some jerk she met when she was at the skating rink while Jane started repainting Will's nails all over again with the same soft pink color. Will listened with all interest, nodding when Max said something agreeable, and laughing when she said something hilarious.

Max then started going off about how hungry she was, and went downstairs to fix something for the three of them, leaving Will alone with Jane.

She was almost done with Will's nails, and she looked pretty satisfied with it. Will smiled.

"Will?" She called out all of a sudden.

"Yes?"

"You're not well, are you?"

Will blinked.

Did Jane know? He had to stop himself from laughing hysterically and probably breaking down, because of course, Jane knew. Jane knew *everything*.

"What made you say that?" Will asked, trying to pass it off nonchalantly.

"Will," Jane said again, voice hard.

"Jane."

Jane stared at him, hard and intent. "Friends don't lie."

Will sighed. Because really, what was Jane expecting him to say? *Hey, Jane, I'm in love with my best friend who also happened to be your boyfriend, and now I'm practically dying and coughing flowers all over, but no worries.* No, it just didn't work that way. Not even because friends didn't lie.

"Jane, I'm fine."

"Will, I can help you," Jane said, persistence painted on her face. "Let me help you."

Will stifled a cry.

He was about to say something when Max came barging on with a bowl of barbeque flavored popcorn, grinning widely at the two. "So, what did I miss?"

Will only flashed her a soft smile, pretended the colors of his nails were too interesting, and ignored Jane's knowing looks she had been sending his way.

True to his words, Richie did actually come Saturday night, with a duffel and a sleeping bag in both hands.

"I figured it would be time for a Super Saturday Sleepover, since we haven't done that in a while," he said with a smile upon entering the Byers residence.

Joyce actually liked Richie, and if Will would say so himself, he would even go as far as thinking he was Joyce's favourite among all, replacing Mike's old title. She liked having Richie around, insisted on letting him have dinner with them and Richie would comply because... well, he rarely had dinner with his own parents anyway.

"You're not okay," Richie commented when Will coughed a petal.

He was currently lying on Will's bed, taking the petal and examining it on his fingers, and Will had to snatch it off gently from him.

Will was still pretty embarrassed about the whole thing, but Richie didn't seem to mind. He was too calm and collected about the whole idea, and Will wasn't sure if he should be terrified or not.

"I mean, there's a vine of flowers growing and covering my lungs," Will replied sarcastically. "I'm pretty sure that I'm peachy."

"Now, look at you, Willard. You're learning smartass comments from me," Richie raised an eyebrow, grinning. "I'm proud."

"Jerk."

"Anyway," Richie looked up at Will again. "Does your mom know?"

"No. No way," Will sighed deeply. "I don't want her to know. She's... She already worried about me too much. I don't want to be a burden anymore."

It was Richie's turn to sigh. "William."

"Richie, please. I'm trusting you with this," Will practically begged. "You're the first and only one to know. *Please*."

"Fine," said Richie defeatedly.

Will still didn't know how it all happened, how his life turned into some science fictional horror into a cliché possibly romantic summer film with full of pining and heartbreaks and an even possible *death*.

God, he felt like he was in a Shakespeare play.

"Do you think you'll have the surgery?" Richie asked again.

Will would be lying if he said he never thought about it. But the amount of money needed for surgery was obviously something they couldn't afford, and he just couldn't put another baggage in his mom's back like that. He already caused enough - *too much* - and he was sorely aware of that fact.

"I don't know," Will shrugged. "Will you?"

"In case you actually forgot," Richie said, snickering a little. "You're the one chucking roses out your mouth, Willy Billy. Not me."

"I know that," Will rolled his eyes. "But like if ever, will you?"

Richie seemed to be in deep thought about Will's question, and for a minute, he prepared himself for a foul or probably witty comment from him, but instead got surprised with what Richie said.

"I mean, considering that we're actually poor as a fucking rat, I probably won't be able to afford that surgery," he shrugged before adding, "But like, fuck surgery, you know?"

Will didn't reply.

"I sure as hell don't want to die, but if that surgery will fuck me up, then nevermind," he continued.

"It will not exactly do serious damages, right?" Will asked curiously.

"If they removed it through surgery, they'll remove your feelings altogether for Wheeler," Richie simply replied. "It's a win-win situation. You don't die, and you don't feel stupid for loving someone who don't care."

Will frowned. Richie made it sound so bad.

"You also probably lose the ability to love ever again," he finished. "So there's that."

"That happens?"

"Most of the time." Richie sounded so mad and *bitter*, and Will really don't know what to make up of that. "Surgeries can change you a lot, you know?"

"So, you'd rather die?" Will asked when he realized Richie wasn't going to say anything anymore.

"Something like that."

"You're insane, Tozier."

And then Will thought. He could actually get that surgery, if he worked hard enough. Maybe it wouldn't be too expensive, maybe Jonathan and his mom could actually cheap in a little, and afford it. He could maybe work, help with the expenses and all that.

Maybe it wouldn't be too bad.

But then, that meant forgetting Mike. Forgetting how he got lost in Mike's eyes, how once upon a time, he was just a kid in love and it was all fun and games until it wasn't anymore. Forgetting how he could see every constellations marking Mike's skin, forgetting how he tried to make himself an entire galaxy, not realizing Mike never really liked stars.

And maybe that was worse than death after all.

"My old friend back in Derry," Richie spoke again, making Will look down at him. "He had the same disease, you know."

"*Had?*"

"He's - he died," Richie muttered.

"I'm sorry."

"It wasn't your fault," Richie said, staring up at the ceiling. "At first we thought it was just a simple asthma, you know? What with all the shortage of breath and allergies to dusts and stuff. He even had a goddamned inhaler, Jesus."

His laugh sounded bitter and harsh, but Will didn't point it out. Not

even when he noticed Richie's eyes watering a little.

"So, we didn't think it was anything serious, you know? And we're all really fucking stupid for that," Richie added, his voice starting to get hoarse. "It's too late when we found out - stage four, for fuck's sake. His lungs were full of fucking flowers."

"Was it - I mean, who was the reason for it?" Will asked carefully, hoping it wouldn't look like he was intruding although he probably was.

"It was me."

His breath hitched.

Oh.

"Oh."

And now Will understood. The way Richie eyed him with scared eyes the first time he saw Will with scattered petals in his bathroom floor, the way Richie would always remind him of his *cough medicine*, the way Richie took care of him as if he had been doing it for a long time.

He got it now.

"I should have known," Richie shakily mumbled. "I wasn't even - *God*, he was practically dying in front of us and we didn't even fucking noticed."

Will didn't really want to pry, didn't want to ask any more stupid and personal questions, but curiosity got the best of him, so he did anyway. "How did you know it was you?"

"He told me in his deathbed," Richie laughed humorlessly.

"You don't..."

"It's not that I don't love him back," Richie cut him off, blinking the tears away. "It's just that I was young and stupid - still am - and just so fucking messed up. I wouldn't know what to do, hell, I can't even

reciprocate his feelings."

And really, even without Richie saying it, Will knew he was blaming himself for it, blaming himself for the death of a friend because of loving someone who couldn't even love himself at the first place.

And Will knew Richie didn't deserve that.

"Hey," Will started, and tried even though he knew Richie wouldn't believe him anyway. "It's not your fault, you know."

"Of course, it is," Richie snorted. "If only I wasn't too fucked up, maybe I could've loved him, too."

"You can't help who you fall in love with," Will explained, sighing a little. "It wasn't his fault for loving you, it wasn't your fault for not loving him, the same way it wasn't Mike's fault for loving Jane."

Richie stayed silent for a while before muttering, "I guess."

"You don't get to choose who you love," Will said, and he may or may not sound too bitter about it. "I don't think it works that way."

And God, he hoped it did.

He really hoped it did.

Later that night, Will had a really bad fit of coughs that woke Richie up at exactly 3:45 AM and Will had to apologize the whole time he was coughing flowers because he felt really bad for ruining his friend's sleep.

"It's fine," Richie mumbled sleepily.

He ended up coughing for a whole five minutes at least, harder to conceal it and afraid he would wake his mom up, and before he knew

it, his bedroom looked like a massacred garden of roses.

He tried hard to fight the tears back.

Richie sat there beside him, rubbing his back soothingly while his other hand was wrapped around Will, murmuring comforting words the same way he did back in the Tozier's bathroom floor.

"You're fine, Willard," Richie murmured, voice wavering slightly, but not letting go of Will. Even he didn't sound too confident with himself. "You're fine."

"I'm really not, Rich," Will sobbed desperately.

Richie let out a soft sigh, tightening the embrace and only letting go when he looked at Will seriously, saying, "If it makes you feel any better, I actually like roses. They're my mom's favorite."

Will choked out a laugh.

It may or may not have made him feel better, in a way.

Willing themselves to sleep had been harder after that, but somehow, they managed to get it. Will's bed was filled with awkward tangled limbs and a few remaining petals, forgotten and ignored through the sound of their calm breathing.

Yeah, he thought. Definitely better.

2. Stage Two

"Hey, Dustin?"

"Yes?"

"Have you heard of the, um, the Hanahaki Disease?"

Dustin looked up at him, eyebrows furrowing a little at the question. They were currently at the library - him and Dustin - since he promised his friend he would go with him to do their assignments because Lucas, apparently, *'lost it but it wasn't my fault, all right, Erica just really liked barging in my room and snooping, I'm sorry'*.

"You mean the flower cancer?"

Flower cancer? Will raised an eyebrow, looking at Dustin curiously before muttering, "Um, yes?"

"A few, bits and pieces, I think," Dustin shrugged, before adding. "It's something like a cancer - they keep on comparing it to lung cancer - so, basically someone just starts growing flowers in their lungs about some unreciprocated love or something. It's all vague stuff, I don't really know a lot about it."

Will only nodded.

"Why?" Dustin asked all of a sudden.

"Oh, you know," Will shrugged, trying to pass it off nonchalantly. "I've heard stuffs here and there, and since you like, know everything, I thought I'd ask you."

Dustin chuckled. "Well, I'd read books about it for you."

Will actually learned about the disease; made a research about it himself, and found out a few things like for one, what it was called - the Hanahaki Disease.

He read at least fifteen books about it and so far, they all taught him the same thing. Like, as stated, it had four stages and although Will

fed himself with enough scientific terms and explanation, all of it only came with the same findings.

Stage one: curable, stage two: curable, stage three: maybe curable, and stage four: not curable (death).

It all sounded obscure and stupid but although that was the case, it was true, and Will himself was one of the living proofs. It kind of sucked when he had to put it like that.

He learned the disease didn't exactly start in the first stage, or at least, not most of the time. It could start with the second or the third, and if you were unfortunate enough, it could even start at fourth. The symptoms were kind of confusing too, to begin with. Sometimes, patients didn't start coughing up the petals until the third stage, when it could be deemed too late for cure.

He had read about experiences from real life patients, too. Most of them survived through the means of surgery - especially those who were in the third stage already, some, as ideal as it sounded, was cured when their love was reciprocated, and others... Well, others may had the same mindset as Richie.

Death was better than indifference, they had said.

"Hey, Dustin," Will called out quickly, forcing a small smile when Dustin looked at him. "I need to head to the bathroom for a minute, all right?"

"Sure, Will."

He was only thankful he managed to reach the bathroom before coughing and throwing up flowers once again. He sighed. This was bad - he was getting *worse*, and God, his mom didn't even know and Mike Wheeler probably didn't even *care*.

This couldn't get any more *fantastic*.

Letting out a last cough that moment, he silently let himself out of the library, walking home straight before forcing himself to sleep.

He supposed he just had to apologize to Dustin tomorrow for leaving

him like that.

When Thursday came and Max and Jane practically dragged him to Max's house for them to try their "new stuff" with him, Will was actually almost glad for the distraction.

Turned out their new stuff was actually lip gloss, and Will may or may not have changed his mind about being glad for the said distraction.

Max and Jane had been arguing between what color fit Will's skin tone perfectly - a pale light orange for Jane and a baby pink for Max and *nothing* for Will - and Will's head kind of hurt just by hearing it. Sure, he was *gay*, but that didn't automatically mean he knew something about these stuffs.

When they settled for Max's choice, Will was too afraid to even let them near his lips.

"It looks perfect," Max gushed after coating his lips with the second layer, ushering Will to look at the mirror.

Huh, he thought. It didn't look bad, he had to admit - well, it actually didn't look like anything, aside from the slight glimmer it added on his lips - and he was grateful they actually put this on him instead of the orange one.

They ended up doing Jane's full makeup as well - they being Max and Will just actually watching - and she looked really stunning as ever.

When Max turned to left when Billy called her for some 'errands', Will quickly excused himself to go to the bathroom, but with no such luck, he was deemed too late when he let out a small cough, eyes widening in fear and panic as he saw what was on his hands.

Jane saw it, too.

When he turned to look at Jane, she was giving him an indecipherable expression and Will wished he really knew what she was thinking right now.

"Will," she called out softly, reaching for the petals on Will's hands. "You're not well."

"Jane, please."

"Who is it?" She practically demanded, although anxiety and panic was drawn in her eyes. "You can tell me. I won't tell."

"It's no one," Will said hardly.

Jane couldn't know. If Will would assume that she didn't know just yet, then it was better to keep it that way. She *couldn't* know, Will was already causing too much trouble.

"Jane, don't tell anyone," Will said with a strangled voice, looking at Jane with pleading eyes. "You can't, okay? Only you and Richie knows about this."

She seemed to understand what Will was saying but couldn't quite understand why he was saying it. Will was fine with that - she wasn't stupid anyway, she'd figure it out sooner. A little confusion never hurt Jane, and Will felt like a jerk for even thinking that.

"Okay," she mumbled softly, nodding. "I won't tell."

"You promise?" Will looked at her intently but gently, hoping she could hear him think, *friends don't lie, Jane, they don't lie.*

"I promise."

And for Will, that was enough.

When Mike told him about the "surprise", Will wasn't sure if he should be delighted or terrified. He had plenty of reasons to be skeptical about this because for one, Mike Wheeler just *never* did surprises and two, it involved *the carnival*.

Mike *hated* the carnival.

Will couldn't exactly remember the last time he went to the carnival - he was probably around six or seven at the time - so, the thought of being in it *right now* came off as weird to him.

Still, Mike looked pretty excited about it, so he compromised.

Mike was practically dragging him everywhere, trying out every rides and stalls possible, talking about winning him a stuffed animal but failing, and maybe, this was where Will would tell himself that he wasn't a hopeless case.

Maybe he could be cured.

How bad would it be anyway, right? Maybe, Mike actually liked him too, and all the flowers in his lungs would start wilting, fading like they were never there at the first place. Maybe, he didn't actually need to get that surgery since Mike reciprocated his feelings. Maybe, he wouldn't die because Mike had been in love with him the whole time too, just waiting and searching for possible signs of Will's feelings his own.

Maybe, it wasn't as bad as Richie told him.

"Why the surprise, Mike?" Will asked curiously when they were sitting on one of those wooden benches scattered around the carnival, eating ice cream and popcorn.

"We never really hang out anymore," Mike shrugged.

"Mike," Will sighed.

"It's true," Mike replied, looking at him. "We're both always busy with stuffs and school. You're also always hanging out with Richie."

"Sorry."

"Will," Mike sighed deeply before looking at him seriously. "Will, I know you're not telling me something. And for some reason, when I ask Richie about it, he's either always dodging the question or calling me a nosy jerk."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Will," Mike repeated intently. "You know I'm your best friend, right? You don't have to keep secrets from me. I know something is wrong, Will. I'm not stupid."

"Mike, I'm fine. I promise," Will said softly. "You don't have to worry about me. I'm okay."

"Will," Mike whined, obviously not believing Will.

"I'm all right."

And yes, maybe even Will himself had a hard time believing that, but that didn't matter. He *was* fine - *he had to* be. If that meant faking it until he made it, then so be it.

"Okay," Mike sighed, obviously defeated.

Maybe Will could also pretend he didn't see the single petal fell from his lips - the one he hastily put away in his pocket - when Mike wasn't looking.

Fake it 'til you make it, right?

"How's Tozier anyway?" Mike asked suddenly, popping a few popcorns in his mouth. "It's like he never hangs out with us anymore - or at least *us*. He always hangs out with you."

"Mike, Richie literally *always* hangs out with us," Will sighed. He stopped himself from the urge of telling Mike that *he* was the one not hanging out with them since he was always too busy with Jane anyway.

Will tried not to be too bitter about it.

"Maybe," Mike mumbled through the popcorn in his mouth. "I

probably just miss Trashmouth."

"Right," Will chuckled.

"Now that I remembered it, you know what," Mike said after a minute, looking at Will with narrowed eyes. "Jane actually told me something about you."

Will's heart skipped a beat.

"She did?" He stammered and almost choked on his popcorn, careful not to let Mike notice his panicked state. For sure, Jane didn't tell him, right? She made a promise, after all, and Will knew she wasn't the type to break *any* kinds of promises.

"Yeah."

"W-what is it?" He stuttered.

"She said," Mike took a deep breath, looking at Will seriously before saying, "She said you looked good in pink lip gloss."

Will let out a deep, shaky breath.

Mike Wheeler was an asshole.

"Right," Will breathed out hysterically, on the verge of breaking down. His laugh sounded too shrill even on his ears - it kind of hurt. "Ha-ha, very funny, Mike."

"Hey, I was just kidding," Mike snickered. "I'd like to see that though."

Will could only nod. He was too busy hyperventilating to even let what Mike said sink in. *Breath, in through the nose, out through the mouth - God. Breathe, breathe, breathe.*

"Hey, you okay?" Mike asked, suddenly looking too worried.

"Yes!" Will gasped, smiling but it turned out looking more like a grimace. "Dandy, peachy, fine. You're just funny, really. Mike Wheeler, my best friend, *the comedian*, ha-ha."

Mike looked at him skeptically.

It took at least another whole minute before Will had to regain his tranquility, making Mike look at him even weirder.

"Maybe hanging out with Richie actually was not doing you any good," Mike raised an eyebrow, before shrugging it off, finishing his ice cream cone. "Anyway, you up for another Ferris Wheel ride?"

Will let out a chuckle.

"Of course."

Inviting Mike Wheeler in Castle Byers wasn't something new to him. In fact, he couldn't count how many times Mike had been in his fort already since the amount was way too *many*.

Richie Tozier, however, was a different thing.

It wasn't even anything planned - Richie coming over in his fort. It only even started when he asked Mike to come, spending time at his makeshift castle just like the old times, reading comic books and talking about movies, but Mike had said no, had said something between the lines of taking Jane somewhere.

Will, at least had the decency to pretend it didn't sting that much.

It wasn't like he was expecting anything, right? Of course, he was aware he wouldn't stand a chance despite all of the fantasies he'd fed his disillusioned mind. That was what brought him to this... this *flower chucking* thing disease anyway.

He had a good grasp on reality despite loathing it.

Richie had the perfect timing though, casually striding beside Will, asking him if he want to hang out after school, doing mundane stuffs

like they usually did.

He'd said yes.

"Damn, give it a few more years and neither of us would actually fit inside this castle of yours," Richie chuckled when he entered the fort.

"It's useful sometimes," Will remarked.

They had been inside for at least two hours already, talking about school and old friends and *shared traumas*, for some reason.

Will had been coughing a lot too, but he wasn't as embarrassed about it with Richie around. Richie made everything sound and look so casual, and Will had to stop thinking why. *He knew why.*

"You got to stop doing that," Will sighed.

Richie was currently picking up petals on the floor, collecting them into a big pile, like some kind of hill or something.

"Why not?"

"It's disgusting."

"Why?"

"Richie, those literally came from my mouth," Will explained and rolled his eyes. "Worse, it actually came from my *lungs*. So, yes, Captain Smartypants, it is disgusting."

"It doesn't even have saliva!" Richie retorted, grinning widely. He then started playing an alternative version of *'he loves me, he loves me not'*, just to spite Will, probably.

"Obviously, he loves me not," Will rolled his eyes again. "Or else I wouldn't be throwing up roses."

Will immediately regretted it, feeling like a Grade A jerk for even saying those words. He didn't know why he felt so exasperated about everything, but he knew Richie didn't deserve to be treated like trash just because he felt like it.

Richie sighed.

"You're too uptight today, it's so not like you," he said, looking at Will with a soft expression on his face. "Did something happen? Does it have something to do with school? Do I have to punch someone in the face?"

"Richie, you can't even punch to save your life."

"Worth the try," Richie shrugged. "So, which is it?"

"It's nothing. I just thought," he cut himself off with a sigh, clearing his throat before continuing, "I just thought things are actually getting better. I thought I was making some kind of improvement."

"With your condition?"

"With Mike," Will corrected.

Richie shrugged again. "Same thing."

Will couldn't even bring himself to be offended.

"Anyway, it's just all wishful thinking, those stupid stuffs," he explained nonchalantly, or at least he tried to. "I don't know why I still bother with 'make believes'."

Richie pressed his lips into a thin line. He was about to say something when Will interrupted him by coughing, coughing *real hard* it actually hurt his lungs and his *chest*. He couldn't even stop just to breathe for a second, because he was literally throwing up petals *everywhere*.

"Shit, Will," Richie rapidly grabbed his bottled water, practically shoving it in front of Will, and his voice wavered when he said, "Drink up, Byers, come on."

Will couldn't.

He couldn't even stop coughing.

The coughing got even worse that at some point, Will felt like he

would be throwing up *blood* any second and was weirded out by the fact that he found comfort in *that*.

"Will, Jesus," Richie breathed out, rubbing his palm on Will's back.

It was safe to say that Richie Tozier was afraid.

Will would have said something about that, but he couldn't even think straight because of the lack of oxygen in his brain, his stomach hurting like it had some kind of cramps for weeks, and his throat was *so sore*.

When the fit of coughs stopped after a few longer minutes, Will was literally soaked in sweat, with petals sticking everywhere. He was running out of breath too, and was thankful for the bottled water Richie handed him.

Everything hurt.

"Jesus, Byers," Richie mourned in distress. "Don't fucking scare me like that again or I swear to god, I'll be the one to kill you."

Will forced out a smile.

Richie let him lay down for a few minutes - he was *shivering* - while the other cleaned up the mess of petals on the floor.

Will felt like death.

He was too close to drifting off, eyes actually closed and calm, when he heard Richie's shaky sigh, and his cracking voice, "William?"

He opened his eyes.

Richie's eyes wasn't trained on him, and instead staring intently on the petals on his hands, and it was only then that Will noticed Richie's hands were shaking too.

When Richie glanced up and met his eyes, Richie was looking at him with a box of expressions - fear, fright, horror, panic, *fear, fear, fear* - and Will wasn't sure someone could flash such extreme emotions altogether in a short span of time.

"Will," he let out a strangled cry, lifting up a petal with (still) shaking hands. "The petals... they're - Will, they're getting bigger. *They're growing.*"

Will only stared at him in response.

His head was starting to swivel, and he could start seeing colorful spots filling his eyesight - making him even more dizzy for some reasons. His head felt too heavy, his eyes felt rough, and his mouth felt *too dry*.

"Will, you have to," Richie mumbled, anxiously fidgeting with his now empty fingers. "This is getting serious, you have to do something."

"I'll be fine." He managed to bite back, ignoring the harsh pounding in his head. His surroundings were starting to distort, and even Richie didn't even look like Richie anymore.

What was going on?

"Are you fucking hearing yourself now?" Richie barked, making Will's eyes widen. "You're fucking dying, Will. We're fucking talking about *death* here - you're not fucking fine and you obviously won't be if you don't do anything about it!"

"Richie," Will whispered.

"Will, *please*," Richie begged, sounding too desperate. "Don't be stupid about this thing. You can't fucking *die* because of Wheeler."

Will wanted to argue, wanted to tell Richie to just... just *stop talking*, because he didn't know anything, didn't know what Will felt like. He wanted to tell Richie that *no, he didn't get to say that, he didn't get to say that because he didn't know how it felt to fall in love with your best friend and hurting yourself constantly in the process*. He wanted to tell Richie that no, he didn't get a say in this because there were no flowers blooming in his chest.

He wanted to tell Richie a lot of things, but he wasn't able to because in one quick snap, all he was seeing was black.

He woke up to the sound of alarms and machines.

His eyes scanned his surroundings immediately, taking note of the white walls, white curtains, white bed - everything *white*, *white*, *white* - and it instantly kicked in.

Of course, he was in the hospital.

He couldn't exactly say he remembered everything, just bits and pieces of it - he remembered being in Castle Byers, remembered coughing so hard he almost *died*, remembered arguing with Richie...

Richie.

Where was Richie?

"Rich?" He called out, voice hoarse and rough, that actually hurt his throat.

"Oh, you're awake," a female voice somewhere said, and he glanced up to see a nurse, smiling comfortingly at him. "Do you need anything?"

"Water," he rasped out.

"Of course," she nodded, bringing him a glass of water that had been sitting on the coffee table near his bed. "You might want to slow down with it, though. I don't think your throat is well."

Will took a small sip.

"How long have I been out?" He asked when his throat didn't feel too raw - it still kind of hurt though. "And where's Richie?"

"This is your third day," she replied simply, taking back the glass of water Will handed her. "That's your friend, right? Messy hair, funny

glasses, foul mouth? You want me to call him in?"

Will nodded. "Please."

She went out of the room and Will could only feel his throbbing head get worse. He had been here for three days - *three*. What exactly did he miss? That meant his mom knew, right? Possibly even all of their friends. Was Richie still mad at him? *Did Mike know?*

"You're thinking way too loud, ol' chap."

Will turned his head quickly, and, *oh, yeah*, that actually hurt. He stifled a groan. "Rich."

"Don't hurt yourself now."

Richie looked tired - no, scratch that, he looked *exhausted* - and Will couldn't help but feel really guilty about it. He could see the circles around Richie's eyes, clear and emphasized because of the thick glasses, and his mop of hair was messier than ever. It also didn't help that he looked really pale.

"How are you?"

Richie chuckled. "I should be the one asking you that, asshole." Het let out a sigh. "I distinctly remember telling you *not* to scare me again, then proceeded to faint a few minutes after." Another sigh. "How'r you, Willington?"

"Okay, kind of dizzy, but okay," Will answered. "And you?"

"I was fucking terrified to death, William."

"Right," Will nodded, biting his lip. "Sorry about that."

Richie sat on his bed, ruffling his already messy hair before adjusting his glasses, looking at Will before urging, "You have questions, Willy Wonka. Come on."

Will sighed. "Does my mom know?"

"Yes."

"And the others?"

"They know too," Richie responded, looking far too guilty. "I tried telling Mrs. B that you don't want any of the party members knowing, but even she wasn't able to do anything about it. Sorry, William."

"It's fine," Will swallowed. "Do they know who it is though?"

"They don't," Richie answered simply, shaking his head. "Only I do, but I'm thinking Mrs. B has a good guess on who it is - your brother too. The others are pestering me about it though."

"Okay," Will whispered.

"So, Wills Bills!" Richie clapped his hands, grinning hard. Will noticed the discomfort though, as if something was bothering Richie. He looked too restless, too fidgety. "Do you want to hear the good news first, or the bad news?"

"The good news?" He answered with uncertainty.

"Right, of course," Richie nodded, and Will couldn't help but get bothered by this blatant facade. "So, the good news is that you can actually go home tomorrow. I'm fucking sure you don't want to spend another day at the hospital, yes?"

Will nodded simply.

"And the bad news?"

Richie swallowed hard, enough for Will to notice, wringing his hands anxiously. Richie couldn't even manage to make eye contact for longer than a minute, and Will was certain something was *wrong*.

"Rich?" He called out gently.

When Richie looked at him straight in the eye, his eyes were watering, and only when he let out choked sobs did Will know something *serious* was going on.

"Will," he panted, breathing shakily. "You're getting worse. The doctors said you're on the third stage."

Will swallowed hard.

Oh.

"Dude, you can't fucking," Richie sobbed, looking at Will seriously. "Get that fucking surgery, Will. You can't fucking *die -Jesus Christ*, this is like fucking Eddie all over again."

Will couldn't quite wrap his mind around the idea. Stage three. *Stage three*. He wasn't stupid, he knew he wasn't getting any better, but he sure as heck didn't think it would be this *worse*.

He was probably *this* close to having a handshake with death.

When he didn't reply, Richie grasped both his shoulders tightly, looking at him intently, saying, "Will, you have to get that damned surgery or so help me. I don't fucking - fuck, I don't care if you lost Wheeler, but I can't lose you. *You can't fucking die.*"

Will couldn't reply.

He couldn't even think straight.

He wasn't getting any better. There were flowers blooming in his chest, the one supposedly in his wake, and imagine the irony behind all that. The roses in coffin were the same reason why he'd be there at the first place.

Things were getting worse.

Mike had visited him that night, a forlorn, almost betrayed expression on his face. Will couldn't really blame him for that.

"You never told me," Mike rasped out, wrapping his around Will's wrist gently.

"I didn't find the need to."

"You're *dying*, Will," Mike choked out, and Will had to pretend he didn't feel the tug in his chest when he saw Mike's expression. He was mad, confused, but mostly he was in pain.

Will thought he could maybe call it quits.

"Doesn't anything matter anymore?" Mike asked, tears forming in his eyes. "Do you want to *die*? Leave your mom - leave us behind. Leave *everything* behind?"

"It's not easy for me," Will defended before coughing out a petal, one big enough to hurt his chest again.

"Do something about it, Will. Come on," Mike practically begged, slightly tightening his grip on Will's wrist. "Who is it anyway? Is it some girl from school? A boy? Is it Richie? Who is it?"

"Mike," Will softly muttered.

"Will, you *can't* die," Mike insisted, not even bothering to wipe the tear that fell from his eyes.

Will knew he couldn't die - he didn't want to. He had dreams and plans and goals, as dumb as it sounded when it came from someone as young as him. He couldn't leave his mom - he just couldn't let her suffer like that again.

But then Richie's words came ringing in his ears once again.

Because, hey, wasn't feeling inhuman felt like dying as well? He wouldn't want to be some kind of indifferent species who wasn't capable of feeling emotions - of feeling *love*. He wasn't born to be a well functioning robot in a poor, almost lifeless body.

And wasn't that worse than death itself?

3. Stage Three

It had been a week since his stay at the hospital, and things were getting worse than ever. The coughing fits happened more frequently, his chest grew tighter with every passing day, and sometimes, even talking took a greater effort. His mom had been worried sick about him since then, worse when he was fighting a battle with the monsters from the upside down.

He had noticed the growth of the petals too - not like he hadn't from the beginning anyway. It was harder to throw them up for their continuous increase in size, which meant it had been harder to breathe as well. He managed to deal with it though, for what it was worth.

His mom had talked to him a lot of times about getting the surgery, and every time, Will would only give her an ambiguous answer, something along the lines of "maybe" and "I will think about it", the ones that would usually end with a defeated sigh from Joyce.

The party had been pretty helpful with him, as much as he already expected that. Max and Jane had been helping with the researches, if there were ever alternative solutions for his conditions. They also had been asking him nonstop about who was the recipient of the unrequited love, but he kept his mouth shut.

Lucas would always bring him bottled waters, some Tylenol if his head hurt too much on a particular day, and Dustin would pack him enough cough medicines no matter how many times Will had told him they had no effect on him since Richie wasn't usually around to do it for him anymore.

Yes, Richie could be avoiding them -*him* - for some reason. He never really hang out with the party anymore, even on D & D nights, and he never missed those. Will was confused to say the least, but he also missed Richie a lot. Maybe it was the fact that their last conversation didn't exactly ended up in good terms, or maybe Richie just wouldn't want to be his friend anymore. It kind of sucked.

Mike, well... It always came back to Mike anyway. Mike with pretty

eyes and perfect flaws, like he was carved by some god himself with the intent of unintentionally breaking other people's heart. Mike who was the reason behind the flower bed in Will's chest.

It always came back to him.

It just sucked it wasn't the same with him for Will.

He was currently having lunch with his family - with Jane and Hopper - but he wasn't exactly in the mood to eat so he ended up pushing things in his plate with his fork which earned a disapproving look from Joyce.

"Honey," Joyce said all of a sudden, looking at Will with a tight lipped smile on her face. Will knew what those meant, he knew those weren't real. "Jane and I were just talking about your... condition."

"Okay?" Will answered skeptically.

"Will, baby," she glanced at Hopper who subtly nodded his head. "Don't you think - can we - Jane said she wanted to help."

Oh.

Of course.

"Mom," he answered softly, looking at her with tired eyes. "Mom, I'll be fine. I don't - Max read somewhere that it could sometimes go away - the flowers could wilt on its own, mom. We just have to wait."

"Will," she called desperately.

"Mom, I'm okay, I promise," Will insisted, smiling softly with a nod. "I'll be fine - *I'll live*. It will be okay, mom."

"Kid, you're dying," Hopper stated sternly.

"Hopper," Joyce warned.

"We can't let you die," Hopper continued, ignoring Joyce. "It's either surgery or Jane's help. We want you to live, kid. Don't fight us on this one."

Will stifled a sob.

He looked at his mom and saw sleepless nights and restless days, saw frantic phone calls and last minute appointments, saw desperation and heartbreak and guilt. He saw a broken woman, and it hurt somehow to know he was the one who shattered her.

He looked at Jonathan and saw graveyard shifts, saw loads of part-time jobs to support them - to support *him* - saw stress and fright and *panic*. He saw someone who was once his hero, someone who couldn't even fight for himself right now.

He looked at Hopper and saw nothing but pain and worry, well hidden behind the thick walls covering him - strong yet old and on the verge of crumbling down. He looked at Jane and saw *love*, love in its purest form, love like she wasn't confused and exhausted and in pain.

So, Will sobbed.

Because this? He was causing this all. He was causing it and only making it worse by not helping himself, by torturing himself just because someone couldn't love him back. He was throwing away - *wasting away* - not only his but his family's life because of someone who gave him too much flowers it would've caused his death.

"Okay," he choked out, voice cracking and looking at his mom with misty eyes. "I'll - I'll get help. With Jane, or the surgery, either way."

His mom let out a strangled cry, laughing and tearing up and engulfing him in a tight embrace. "Yes, honey, of course. We'll do that, okay? We'll do that as soon as possible."

Will nodded, seeing others looking at him with an ounce of relief. Yes, he could do this.

He had to tell Richie.

When he knocked at the Tozier's residence that afternoon, he was surprised to see Richie's mom open the door for him because that rarely - if never - happened.

"You're here for Richard?"

"Yes, ma'am," he answered politely, nodding. "Is it a bad time?"

"No," she simply replied, opening the door wide open for him to enter. "He's in his room."

He wasn't sure if he should enter Richie's room - if Richie wanted him there at the first place, or if it would be considered an invasion of privacy. Still, he knew he had to tell him the news with the hopes of mending their friendship, knocking on the door with a deep sigh.

His eyes widened a little with what he saw.

Richie was sitting on his bed, arranging a pile of flowers - white daffodils - together in a piece of paper. Will's breath hitched.

"Rich?"

Richie looked up, smiling softly at him as a greeting. "Hey, Willy Wonka."

"What are you," Will started, cutting himself off because of the lack of words coming out from his mouth. He was confused, in the simplest sense, as to what was going on. "*Are these?*"

"Nah," Richie chuckled, making Will breathe out a sigh of relief. "Daffodils, they're Beverly's favorite. I think they're coming over next weekend."

"All the way from Derry?"

"All the way from Derry," Richie nodded.

Will had to stop himself from the outburst of emotions, getting furious at Richie for action like *nothing happened* at all, as if he didn't

just spend the whole week isolating himself from the party, leaving Will sad and confused and just... *mad*.

"You're avoiding me."

Richie didn't answer. Instead, he placed the flowers in his bedside table, looked at Will simply, and asked, "How have you been, William?"

"Dying."

Richie sighed. "You're mad."

"Oh, I don't know," Will replied sarcastically, shrugging. "I mean, you just ignored me for a whole week, not even telling me why, right? It wasn't anything serious. I'm just *peachy*."

"I'm sorry," Richie apologized. "It was kind of an asshole thing to do. You don't deserve that."

"Are you going to tell me why?"

"No," Richie shook his head.

Will sighed deeply, sitting on the edge of Richie's bed, fiddling with the lone daffodil forgotten. He tried swallowing down the itch he felt on his throat, but failed, coughing out a whole red rose, all complete with petals.

Richie noticed this and sighed. "You're worse."

"I'm getting help," Will answered back, looking at Richie. "Jane - she's willing to help. I don't know if it's going to be her way or surgery. My mom said it'll be some time around next week. I just thought I'd let you know."

"That's good," Richie remarked.

"You don't sound so sure."

"I mean, it would just be different, I guess," Richie shrugged. "Like a different version of you, but still you anyway." He let out another

sigh. "Does Wheeler know?"

"Not really."

"Are you planning to tell him?"

"I don't know," he answered honestly, biting his lip. He looked straight at Richie's eyes, seeing thousands of emotions he couldn't decipher, and whispering. "Please don't avoid me anymore."

Richie scooted closer to him, wrapping an arm around him, breathing out shakily, "I'm sorry, Byers."

"It's okay."

"It really isn't," Richie mumbled back, and Will could feel him shaking. "Sorry I made you feel like shit just because I was so fucking selfish about everything. I'm sorry."

"Hey, Rich, it's fine."

"I'll tell you what," Richie pulled away, looking at him with a lopsided grin masked on his face. "After your surgery or whatever, we'll go get ice cream as a celebration or some shit. A celebratory 'fuck you' to your flower cancer."

Will let out a low chuckle, before asking, a little morose. "Are we supposed to be celebrating the loss of feelings, too?"

Richie sighed.

"I'm sorry this is all fucking happening," he had said. "I honestly don't know what 'survivors' do after the operation. It wasn't like it's actually cancer, you know? You're almost practically dead after that damned surgery."

"I know that, Rich," Will sighed.

"Look, we'll figure it out, okay?" Richie promised, looking at him with all determination. "You and me both, right?"

Will looked at him, and he wasn't sure. Wasn't sure if he should

bother himself with it anymore, wasn't sure if he should tell Richie they were too old to play pretend.

Instead, he nodded, looking at Richie with the same amount of determination, smiling.

"Right."

The first time he saw Mike that week, he was quickly engulfed in a tight embrace.

It made his chest tighter - but in a good way - and he had to stop himself from lingering for so long, especially when Mike pulled away to look at him. It made his heart skip a bit.

"I heard about the news," Mike said, his hands still on Will's shoulders. "That's... That's good to know."

"Yeah."

He let the bitterness bubbling inside him stir, thinking that Mike Wheeler was actually in front of him, telling him everything was good when at the first place, he was the reason why all those goodness was starting to fade away.

But it was fine. It wasn't like he was blaming Mike, wasn't like Mike knew anyway.

They laid down on Will's bed, letting silence take over, and for the first time after a long one, Will looked at Mike and wondered why couldn't it be him?

That was stupid, he thought to himself. The same way he thought it was stupid to believe in happy endings. Why did he think he would get his happy ending when the start wasn't even good, to begin with?

"You never told me who it is."

"It's no one," Will simply replied.

"It's obviously not no one if you're coughing roses and dying," Mike retorted, looking at him seriously. "Who is it, Will? You can tell me, I won't tell."

"It doesn't matter anymore, Mike," Will told him, letting out a long sigh. "I'd be getting treated sooner anyway. That person would be nothing but a memory anymore - it'll be all good again."

Mike sighed. "I'm kind of worried about the surgery. Richie told me it was, well, for lack of a better word, bad."

"You talked to him?"

"Before," Mike answered nonchalantly. "He was worried about you. He thought he messed up by telling you how bad the surgery was that you wouldn't want to get it anymore."

"It can't be that bad," Will commented.

"Maybe," Mike agreed, although sounding a little too uncertain. He stayed quiet for a minute, only looking at Will, before starting again, "He told me about Eddie too, you know."

"Eddie?"

"Eddie his old friend?" Mike offered. "The one with the same disease."

"Oh," Will muttered. He remembered it now. Richie told him that story too, but he never really put a name on it (or he might had, but Will had forgotten). "You think maybe I'll share the same fate as him?"

"Will."

Will sighed. He seemed to be doing that a lot lately. "Sorry, I'm just - I kind of prepared myself for it, I guess. What with all that happened, and the decision about the surgery only came about recently anyway."

"I understand."

"You ever heard about the other way of being cured, Mike?" He asked all of a sudden, not really sure why he did. "You know, when the flowers start wilting?"

"When the love is reciprocated?" Mike guessed.

"Yeah," Will nodded.

"That could work, you know," Mike told him easily, eyeing him with determination. "You're *Will*. I'm pretty sure anyone who finds out you're in love with them will fall just as fast with you. You're amazing, and anyone who fails to see that is stupid."

Will had to stop himself from laughing.

"I'm not amazing," he replied instead, shaking his head. "If I am, I wouldn't be throwing up flowers anytime now."

"Like I said, stupid."

Yeah, Will thought. Stupid, maybe. He thought Mike was the smart one, but now he was just acting anything but it. He let out a sigh instead. Maybe they weren't crazy together anymore.

Stupid together, maybe.

"What would you do if you're coughing flowers?"

Since the moment the party found out about Will's condition, they started making time for what they called the 'research Sunday' where they just basically raid whatever learning materials and bring it to Will's house to answer their questions about his disease. Will wasn't exactly very fond of it, since it only reminded him how much of a...*freak* he was, but he never mentioned it. He really did appreciate

the effort, after all.

Today, they were at the Wheeler basement.

"I don't know, I never really thought of it," Lucas answered, shrugging, and he then proceeded to defend his answer. "I mean, it's a rare disease, so."

"I don't know why it's considered rare," Max chimed in. "I'm pretty sure there are a lot of cases of unrequited love, right?"

Will didn't know too, if he was being honest.

"Well, it says here in Boyd George's book that the victims are totally random, or so for now," Dustin declared, eyes never leaving the book he was holding. "The doctors never really made a link about it yet, so they don't know if these patients have something in common."

"So, like a game of luck?" Mike rolled his eyes.

"Or Russian Roulette!" Lucas exclaimed.

"Something like that," Dustin mumbled, nodding. "Seriously, it's a weird case. It's like anyone can have it, and yet they're still considering it rare. They say it's at least two out of ten person gets it."

Everyone stayed silent then, eyes moving only through the words in their books, carefully reading information that could possibly be helpful to Will's case.

"I will give it to my love."

Everyone turned to Jane.

"What?" Max asked, confused.

"Will asked what we will do if we are coughing flowers," Jane answered slowly, glancing at Will. "I will give it to my love."

"But that will be gross," Lucas responded matter-of-factly, earning a curious look from Jane. "I mean, it comes from your lungs and stuff. Why would you give that to someone?"

Will sighed.

He remembered Richie.

"I miss Richie," he stated, before Jane could say something.

Max nodded approvingly before saying, "Yeah, I actually miss that weirdo too. It's like he never hangs out with us anymore. Do you think he's all right?"

"He is," Mike said shortly.

Lucas snorted. "And you know this because?"

"I just do," Mike replied, as if that wasn't vague at all. "He's fine. He said he'll hang out with us as soon as his old friends travel back to Derry."

Oh, yeah. Will remembered that.

"They're here?" Dustin looked up quickly.

"For a short visit," Mike shrugged. "Richie said something about catching up, and after that, he said he'll be - I quote, 'ours to play with, he knows we love that'."

Everyone snickered.

"Of course," Lucas muttered softly. "Good ol' Trashmouth."

Will felt bile bubbling up his throat for some reason but he quickly swallowed it down, not exactly fancying to cry in front of everyone at the moment. He ended up coughing hard instead, alerting everyone in worry and panic.

A few minutes and a pile of red roses later, he looked up and flashed a tired smile, saying, "I think I'm up for another round of Snakes and Ladders."

The whole party could only nod.

Sleepovers at the Wheeler residence weren't exactly new. For years, Will (and the party) had been sleeping over at either Mike's room or their basement that Karen Wheeler actually bought enough plates and pillows for them to use whenever they were around, which was most of the time.

When Will told his mom about it, she was a little too reluctant about letting him go, mumbling about his condition and about how Mike would not be able to do something if a bad fit came. Will promised her that it would be fine though, and after lots and lots of actual persuasion with the help of Jonathan (and Mike), she finally agreed.

Which was why Will was currently sitting on the floor of Mike's bedroom, flipping through the pages of a new released comic book. He hadn't been coughing for a while now, which was good, because he didn't really want to make a mess in Mike's room.

"Hey, Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you remember the time you told me we'd go crazy together?"

Mike looked down at Will from where he was sitting on his bed, furrowing his eyebrows a little but flashing a small smile, and saying, "Yes, of course. Why?"

"I don't know," Will answered honestly, shrugging. "It just kind of struck me, I guess, like a vision."

"I still mean it, you know," Mike told him.

"I know."

Will looked down, head twitching and twisting arms, letting himself breathe out a shaky sigh. He knew Mike meant it and he knew he meant well, but most of the time, it just didn't really feel like it.

Most of the time, he just felt losing his mind on his own.

Which kind of sucked, he supposed. Sucked in a way that things around him changed whenever Mike wasn't there, sucked in a way that Mike's world wasn't turning around like his whenever Will wasn't around.

Mike went down from his bed and sat beside Will, looking at him intently and saying, "Will, I really do mean it. If I have to do all those things again, then I will. I still consider you my best friend."

Best friend. Will wished the word didn't feel too sharp coming from Mike's mouth.

"Of course," Will mumbled, smiling softly. "You're my best friend too, Mike."

It had been a while since they had been this close, close enough to make Will's heart go *pit pat pit pat*. He could feel the butterflies flying and crashing and trying to flee inside his ribcage, wandering enough to where the flowers blooming in his lungs were, making his chest tight and making breathing full of hard work.

He wondered what was inside Mike's pretty little head, wondered if he leaned close enough, he could see through Mike's eyes all the things running in his mind, and if Will was ever even there, like a clear window of his head.

Will wondered if Mike would want to see right through his eyes too.

He was only so lost in his trance and a deep one at that, when it all happened. It didn't even register to him until it was too late.

Mike Wheeler was kissing him.

It was only a feathery light pressing of the lips, enough to send shock through his body. It was unexpected and flawless and beautiful and enough to knock his breath away.

It had felt like those bad chick flicks Richie liked watching so much.

When Mike pulled away, Will was staring at him wide eyed, confused

and conflicted but *elated*, and was about to ask - about to say something, anything really - when Mike beat him to it, only smiling with four simple words.

"Let's go to sleep."

And so, they did.

Will never forgot about it.

He never forgot about it despite the fact that Mike never said anything about it for the last three days. *Three days*. It had been three days since that night.

The fact that he hadn't been coughing up petals wasn't helping too. He didn't exactly know what to think. He wasn't sure if it was wishful thinking or he maybe, actually was healed. Maybe Mike actually liked him, and maybe he wouldn't *die*.

He told Richie about it.

"He kissed you?"

"He did," Will nodded, mirroring Richie's flabbergasted expression. "It was too sudden. I wasn't expecting it."

"And you haven't been coughing since?" Richie asked again.

Will nodded.

Richie was only looking at him, an indecipherable expression on his face, and Will wondered if it was a bad sign or not.

He glanced up at Richie, a hopeful glint in his eyes, as he asked, "Do you think maybe... Maybe Mike likes me? Do you think maybe the flowers actually wilted?"

"Maybe."

And Richie didn't sound so sure about it, which was why maybe Will got a little mad. Richie was supposed to be helping him - *supporting him* - and what he was doing was saying otherwise. He was about to say something about it when it happened again.

A rose.

Red and alive and whole.

It was enough to make Will gasp.

"Why isn't it wilted?" He asked shakily, on the verge of hyperventilating. He looked at Richie with wild eyes. "It's supposed to die, Rich."

Richie was looking at him with the same expression, muttering slowly, "I don't know, Will."

"He kissed me," Will nothing but insisted, the flower still placed on his fragile hands. "That... that's got to mean something, right? Why isn't the flower wilted yet?"

"Will, calm down."

"No," Will cried in hysterics. "It's - I don't get it."

"Will."

He let himself get wrapped in Richie's warmth, as questions of *why, why, why* swirled repeatedly in his head. It wasn't making any sense - he was supposed to be healed.

"We'll figure it out, Byers," Richie mumbled through his hair as he cradled Will softly. "I'll be here."

And yes, Richie was here, as he always had been. And maybe it was selfish to think that he wasn't what Will needed right here, wasn't who Will wanted. Maybe it was selfish to hope Richie would be Mike instead.

For at least a second, Will let the pleasure of being selfish get to him.

He still wasn't able to forget it.

Not when Richie told him they'd figure it out.

Not even when he was rushed to the hospital after, when Richie was frightened enough Will would choke to death he was turning blue.

Richie had at least joked about it after, when he was tired and restless beside Will's hospital bed, telling him something along the lines of, "You really do like almost dying in front of me, huh? I don't think I'll be able to break death's heart the same way you did twice, Willy Wonka."

Will could only apologize.

Richie compromised.

He still didn't forget it once he got home, alone in the quiet of his room. Not with all the petals surrounding him, but he kept his mouth shut about it. He never asked Mike, never talked to Richie about it again.

He didn't forget but refrained himself from remembering.

He was scribbling on his old notebook one afternoon when the doorbell rang. It must be the Hoppers, or maybe Richie. He was unusually clingy and protective after Will's second accident, but Will couldn't really say he didn't like it. Richie said it was something about catching up, but Will knew him better to spot the lie.

He heard his mom talking to someone, a female voice ringing from the room. Maybe it was Karen, or Nancy, Will didn't really listen that much, not one for eavesdropping. It was probably a business he

wasn't needed in anyway.

He wished his sense of hearing wasn't that good.

Because he didn't need to listen that much for him to make up what the person his mom was talking to was saying. He had heard desperate whimpers and painful cries. It was clear and all too precise. He knew his mind wasn't playing tricks on him, but *God* he wished it was.

Because that afternoon, Richie Tozier was gone.

He passed away peacefully.

In his bed full of white daffodils.

4. Stage Four

Notes for the Chapter:

First of all... **I apologize.**

I mean, assuming you're all mad at me because of what I did. I'm sorry for that. I would also like to thank everyone who left kudos and nice comments (and death threats), because they inspired me to finish this story. Thank you for reading this one wild messy roller coaster ride with mostly downs, let's be honest.

Anyway, on to the last chapter, folks. This will be the shortest.

Will never thought he could cry hard the way he did. He never thought someone was capable of crying *that much*, he never thought someone could start and end their days with doing nothing so much but crying.

He let himself cry.

He let himself wallow in bitterness and regret and hatred, let himself shoulder the blame because really, how could he not see? How could he not notice? The whispers of reassurances, the soft and gentle touches, the sweet promises... Will should have known.

Richie Tozier was in love with him.

Will had lots of questions in his head, a series of *why, why, why*. Why didn't Richie tell him? Why didn't Richie get the surgery? Why, why, why?

Why was Richie in love with him, of all people.

It was his fault.

Will have always known how painful it was to love someone who could never love you back. But as it was, he learned, that nothing

beats the pain of having someone fall in love with you and having to break their heart in the process.

Richie's funeral had been dark and gloomy despite the harsh sun kissing their skins, the summer breeze around them. There had been no flowers in sight, but there had been a marching band, upon Richie's request, they had said.

His parents were weeping, and for some reason, Will felt sincere sympathy for them, despite Richie telling him they were such *'shitty parents I'd better be fucking off alone in streets anyway'*. Will knew what it felt to be in pain. And after all, parents weren't supposed to bury their children.

Richie's old friends were there too, looking forlorn, but not quite shedding tears. Turned out they actually knew about Richie's condition, which explained the sudden visit that weekend.

And Beverly.

Will immediately knew who Beverly was, mostly because of the white daffodils placed beautifully on her hair. *Beverly's favorite*, Richie had told him. Will tried hard to stop hiccuping through the tears.

They were expecting a eulogy from him, of all people. He wasn't able to say anything though, wasn't able to handle the pain. It was overwhelming, and he hadn't even been prepared. This was the worst he felt in a long time, and that was saying something.

"He wants me to give you this," Beverly told him.

She had approached him after the service, and she really looked pretty up close. The flowers in her hair complimented her eyes.

It was a piece of paper with a daffodil stuck on the edge. It had a messy scrawl of what he remembered was Richie's handwriting, with the words *'to Will, always'* in front.

He took it with trembling hands.

"How long?" He asked Beverly slowly.

"A while," she replied, looking down. "He didn't want anyone to know because he thought he didn't matter. He knew you're in love with your friend, and he didn't want to mess that up."

Will choked on a sob.

"I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault," she said, sounding reassuring. "He didn't have any plans on telling you which got us mad. He knew he's getting worse, which is why he asked us to visit."

"I should've known," Will muttered.

"It's not your fault, William," she repeated, holding his hand. "You don't get to choose who you fall in love with. Those are your words, right?"

"He told you?"

"He did."

"I wish I could've done something," Will said, voice small and strangled. "I wish he could've told me."

"Will that make any difference?" She asked, looking at Will straight in the eye. He could see the tears welling up his eyes, making her icy blues fragile and glassy. It reminded Will of misty lights in the ocean.

"It could have."

It could have.

Will found himself in the safety of Richie's room that afternoon. He let himself down on the bed, a few pieces of white flowers forgotten, and let the smell linger on his skin. It smelled just like Richie.

This would probably be the last time he'd find himself in this place, and he couldn't help but feel like he was intruding, like he was invading Richie's private haven.

Richie, who was gone.

He took the piece of paper from his pocket, fingering the white daffodil attached on the edge, feeling the smooth petal in his skin.

I will give it to my love, Jane's words came back ringing in his ears. He wondered if Richie thought the same, if that was the reason why he gave Will one of the reasons for his death.

With trembling hands, Will unfolded the piece of paper, seeing the familiar handwriting inside.

It was a eulogy.

It was *Will's* eulogy.

He let himself laugh humorlessly at the irony.

Of course, Richie would be doing that - why was he even surprised? Letting himself breathe out a shaky sigh, he read the words written on the paper, his very last memory of Richie.

William, Willard, Willington, Willy Billy, Willy Wonka or the best William in my life (Don't tell Denbrough):

Will is this weird kid from Hawks - big eyes, bowl cut, and really fucking pretty smile - in case you all don't know. He's bright and fucking A, I don't think any letters of the alphabet combined could justify how wonderful he is - he got the charm. He's really fucking small but can do this enormous things, really, what do you expect? He's extraordinary.

Recently, he started throwing up roses too. You thought flowers are all pretty shit? Well, you got to think again, because he's sure as hell determined to take a step in his death march. I don't think I've ever been repulsed by the thought of flowers since. I don't want my boy to die.

You know what they say about love being unconditional? I don't believe that sappy shit but maybe it's true. I've seen Will do all those fucking things and thought, ha, that little fucker can really do outrageous things. Like, for one, maybe, doing some miracle and letting me do what those fools do: love.

Yeah, enough with the mushy stuff. I'm running out of ink.

Will, I'm sorry. I'm really fucking sorry for keeping it all from you or from everyone for that matter. Remember what I told you about surgeries? Well, fuck surgeries still. I'm telling you, Willard. I'd rather die than forget what I'm feeling for you. It's stupid, but I'm not letting any treatment take away what's making me feel human. I'm so sorry.

And I love you.

It sucks I wasn't able to tell you that when I wasn't chucking daffodils. Which in this case, I hope you'll like the one I'll press in here (It's disgusting, I know). I love you, Byers, with all the flowers blooming in my lungs.

Rich.

PS: Looks like I won't be able to get that celebratory ice cream with you then, huh? Sorry.

Will let out a strangled cry.

He pressed the letter in his chest, letting himself cry once again, because damn Richie, really. He didn't deserve all of those things that happened to him - God, he didn't deserve to die. But Will couldn't exactly do anything about it anymore.

He felt his whole body go numb, leaving tears streaming down his face as he stared at the ceiling of Richie's room, wondering why good people never got the soft ending they deserved.

He wondered if he even deserved it at the first place too.

There were things with the party that each of them were aware of and yet were left unspoken. Like Richie's favourite game whenever they played in the arcade palace, Richie's seat in their cafeteria table, the weird infomercial on television that Richie knew the dialogue of by heart - those kinds of things.

The grave where the name Richard Tozier read.

It was safe to say none of the party was ever okay - most of them are still withering in denial, like one particular night after Richie's funeral where they decided to play D & D, just to follow tradition and try to forget, really. Dustin slipped up, letting a careless, "Tozier would be damned if he saw that."

No one said a thing.

It had been a hard week.

The Losers stayed for longer than they intended to, too. The party grew a familiar bond with them, for some reason none of them could explain.

"Sucks we got to know each other in the worst of times, right?" Mike had said, looking around seeing faces of his friends - both old and new ones. "I bet Richie would have wanted this to happen."

"H-h-he was g-good," Bill replied, his stutter obviously worse than ever.

Will loved the Losers, Beverly in particular. She was Richie's best friend, as Richie told him, and she wasn't sugarcoating anything. Will had been enough with those.

"You think he's in heaven now, happy with Eddie?" Will asked her one time.

"I don't even think I believe in heaven, Byers," she smiled, earning a low chuckle from him. "But wherever they are, I bet they're in peace."

In those kinds of places they said in books - paradise and all those bullshit."

"With flowers and rainbows?"

"I don't think they'll want any flowers anytime soon," she grinned.

Will wasn't any better, of course. The flowers were growing, as he knew they were continuously blooming with every tears. He was scheduled to have his surgery this week though, where his mom got the money for it, he didn't know. After lots of researches, they refrained Jane from doing it, with the reasons that she might hurt Will for she still wasn't sure how these worked.

Will was fine either way.

He was just about to call Lucas since he promised to cycle with him to the bookstore that afternoon, when he heard him talking to Mike. It sounded like they were arguing, but that wasn't exactly news to him. He hid behind the thick trees, listening to them argue near the benches. He knew what happened the last time he accidentally listened to a conversation, but he couldn't help himself.

"Richie would want it that way!" Mike had yelled, pulling on his hair frustratingly. "Just don't tell him anything."

"You lied to Will," Lucas spat, looking at Mike like he couldn't believe him. "You lied to *us*. I don't see how Richie would want that."

"He specifically told me not to tell anyone, especially not Will," Mike defended, glaring daggers at Lucas. "It's for the best, okay? What would you guys do if you found out anyway? He knew he was dying."

Will swallowed thickly.

He couldn't believe what he was hearing. After all these time of regretting and blaming himself, *Mike knew*? He watched them drown in confusion and guilt just like that?

"You knew?"

Both boys turned to look at him.

Mike's eyes widened, guilt plastered all over his face. He looked at Will with pleading eyes, sputtering, "Will, what are you doing here?"

"Mike," Will gritted out. "You knew?"

"Richie told me not to tell anyone," Mike reasoned out weakly, looking at Lucas for help but only earned a shaking of head. "I'm sorry I lied, but it was what he wanted."

"Mike, he died," Will barked, voice rising dangerously.

"I know that!" Mike snapped, voice edging with sharpness. "You think it's easy for me? I have to carry that guilt - that, *that regret* of knowing and not telling anyone because I promised Richie I wouldn't."

"You lied to us," Will yelled.

"Will, calm down," Lucas begged, but Will wasn't listening. What was all this to Mike anyway? Did he think it was all fun and games?

"Well, you can't be a hypocrite about this," Mike retorted angrily. "You lied to us, too!" He was glaring at Will despite the tears forming in the corners of his eyes. "Richie knew, Jane knew, and you didn't even tell us. And why?" A scoff. "Because *you're* in love with *me*."

Will gaped his mouth open and stared at him in disbelief.

Pain.

He could feel pain all over his body.

On the corners of his eyes, he could see Lucas mirroring the same expression he had, looking back and forth between him and Mike. And Mike...

Mike was shocked.

"Well, it's a good thing I won't be anymore, right?" Will mumbled, ignoring the droplets of tears carelessly falling from his eyes.

"Will," Mike whispered, slowly approaching him. "I'm sorry, I didn't

mean it like that."

Mike stepped forward.

Will took a step back.

"It's fine," Will bit back, hoping Mike and Lucas didn't notice the cracking of his voice. He glanced at the both of them for one last time before running away, not even daring to look back despite the two calling for his name.

He had to get away.

He had to find Jane.

"You know, if I'm Wheeler, you wouldn't be coughing flowers," Richie told him casually, flipping through the pages of an electronics magazine. "But you'd still have them, because I'll be giving you lots."

"You're a dork," Will giggled.

"It's true," Richie grinned, looking at him. "What's your favorite? Daisies? Hyacinths? Those parasite eating plants? I'm thinking more like sunflowers."

"Tulips," Will answered with a small smile. "They're my mom's favorites."

"Tulips and sunflowers then," Richie beamed, before removing his thick rimmed glasses, blinking a few times before smiling, "Am I Mike Wheeler enough?"

Will only laughed.

"Are you sure about this, Will?" Jane asked him cautiously, carefully wrapping her hands around his wrists. She was looking at him with

slight doubt, laced with a great amount of determination.

He knew he was taking a big risk, knew how reckless this would be. It could hurt him in the process, *God*, it could hurt *Jane* in the process. But then she had agreed to it, and Will was willing to take his chances.

He had to get away.

"I'm sure."

Jane looked at him for several seconds before closing her eyes, hands tightening around Will's wrists. Will waited and let the pain devour him.

He had to get away.

Alternative Ending: *Takes place after the second chapter.*

And this won't be the last time that I break down and wanna crawl to bed, because the truth is, you're the only voice I wanna hear in my head. So, stop calling me out. We're never going to put the pieces back together if you won't let me get better. And stop digging it up, or we're never gonna see it all in bloom.

"You talked to Wheeler."

Will looked up from where he was examining the mixtape Jonathan brought him - it had that song, *Lazing on a Sunday Afternoon*, which was Richie's favourite for some reason but also kind of gave Will headache (he sure loved Freddie Mercury but *still*) - seeing Richie with a glum expression on his face.

"Yes," Will answered simply.

"Did you tell him?"

"I didn't," Will sighed. "I mean, I don't know. It's stupid. I don't know why I should anyway, it's not like he will magically like me back if I told him."

It wasn't that he lost hope - really, he didn't - it was just that he knew there was a fine line between being optimistic *and* realistic, and he was carefully treading that. He knew he wasn't fooling anyone especially himself when he said reciprocated feelings might help.

"Well, I'm telling you."

Will blinked hard at Richie.

"What?"

Richie looked contemplative for a second, biting his lip before letting out a soft groan, and repeating, "I said, I'm telling you."

"You're not making sense, Rich," Will responded, putting the tape on his bedside drawer. He couldn't wait to get out of the hospital, really.

"I'm telling you I like you," Richie blurted out, making Will furrow his eyebrows. "Love you. I'm literally dying for you."

"You don't say," Will replied slowly, oddly.

"No, really," Richie stated, before letting out a loud sigh, looking at Will seriously. "I'm - I do love you - *fuck*, that's weird saying that out loud." Another sigh. "But the point is, I'm dying and I think you deserve to know. I'd cough you a flower but I don't think that's deemed romantic right now."

Will stared at Richie incredulously.

His speed made it harder to catch everything he was saying but Will was pretty sure he understood all of it.

"That's not funny," Will mumbled shakily, looking at Richie with annoyance and anxiety. "Quit messing up with me, Tozier."

"It's true," Richie shrugged, and as if to prove a point, a white petal fell from his lips, and if Will's memory was serving him right, it was from a daffodil.

Will felt like he would die of heart attack before all the flowers blossomed in his lungs.

He stared at Richie for several seconds before letting out an anguished cry. "*What's wrong with you?*" He shook his head in disbelief. "Why are you so calm about this?"

"I don't know," Richie rolled his eyes. "It wasn't like you'd *magically like me back if I told you.*"

Will felt like he had been slapped.

"Richie," Will whispered softly.

"I'm sorry, Byers," Richie responded, looking at Will with guilty eyes. "I know it's a lot to handle, and trust me, I never wanted to tell you if it only wasn't for Beverly."

"You could've told me sooner."

"I don't want to add another baggage," Richie explained. "I don't want to pressure you, and I don't want you to blame yourself. I don't want to fucking force you, and make you feel like you *have* to love me just because I'll die if you won't."

And really, Will knew that - *felt that*. He didn't want any form of sympathy from Mike, didn't want him to feel obliged in loving Will. If there was one thing his mom told him about love, it was that you could never force it.

But Richie didn't understand.

They could make it work.

He told Richie.

"It doesn't work that way," Richie muttered and Will almost caught the bitterness on the edge of his voice. "Look, William. You got to promise me you won't force yourself to love me no matter how hard it gets." He looked at Will intently. "Leave me to die if that's the last thing you have to do."

"Richie."

"Promise me."

Will swallowed audibly, looking down at his wringing hands before willing himself to nod. He would've wanted what Richie was asking of him anyway, and he wasn't going to be one who was hypocritical about this thing. "I promise."

Richie nodded. "Good."

He let Richie crawl beside him and press a soft kiss on his forehead, mumbling, "God, we're such idiots, aren't we?"

Will couldn't agree more.

"We are."

Three months.

That was all they needed, apparently.

Three whole month of forgiveness and laughter and *love*. And well, pain, too, maybe. Will had learned how to count those too, and learn from them, the efficient way.

It sounded too ideal, of course, even Will had thought that. How three actual months could wither the blossoming heartaches in their chests without a machine forcing them out of what It felt like to be human. It hadn't sounded real to him, but it was. It was.

The flowers didn't stop though, but at least, this time, they weren't watching it dig their graves anymore. It sometimes came from the small garden Joyce had improvised with the help of Will, or left from outside his doorstep with a messy scrawl of *'I think I kind of love you'*.

Wasn't that what flowers were for, anyway?

He had been better - they both have. They grew and blossomed together the same time the flowers in their chests died. They watched the sunset, or the sparkling waters in the quarry, and counted the stars. They had been fine. They were finally getting the soft story they deserved.

Joyce was the happiest of them all, Will could really tell, aside maybe from Richie who never failed to remind him everyday, *'I'm so fucking happy, William, I could fucking die.'*

He never failed to remind Richie that was kind of beating the purpose of it all, though.

Richie still loved roses as it had been his mom's favorite, and so Will would always bring him one, everyday, with the reminder of 'it didn't exactly come from *me*, but at least it came from me'.

Richie would only grin. He got Will.

Mike was happy too, as happy as he could be with Jane. Will never told him, because, well, he didn't really have to anymore anyway. Will was happy for him, as well, and was actually glad the bitterness wilted away with the roses.

"You know what I think?" Richie had asked him one night, during a heated scene of Star Wars.

"What?"

"I think I kind of love you."

Will laughed. He felt something growing in his chest, but this time, they weren't roses. Affection, maybe. *Love*. He could never ask for more. "You never say, because I think I kind of love you too."

"That's good," Richie pulled him closer.

It was good, indeed.

Notes for the Chapter:

I really don't like that alternative ending one bit.